SOCIAL DISTANCE AND KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF STEREOTYPES TOWARDS A NEIGHBOURING COUNTRY: A STUDY OF INDIAN CHILDREN IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

T. GEETHA

Associate Professor, Department of Education, Chhatra Marg, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Our perception of the physical space is confined with certain limit. Over the years we have struggled to combat this limitation by cognizing the remote places through imagination which is manifested in the construction of mental maps. This study tries to understand the differential construction of mental maps embedded with specific stereotypes by linguistically and culturally homogeneous school children in India. It was conducted in two different locations – Delhi and Calcutta. The analysis showed that the mental maps were constructed with certain stereotypes which were subjected to distortion due to various attributes of social distance.

KEYWORDS: Knowledge Acquisition, Mental Map, Social Distance, Spatial Reality, Stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are endowed with complex mental processes that enable them to acquire information about the world, represent and transform this information into knowledge and use it to mould their actions and behaviour. This empirical world in the form of space connotes our immediate environment to the remotest part of the earth. Though our perception of the physical world is confined to certain limit, we cognize lot of things through imagination which is concretised in the mental structure and processing of spatial knowledge. Thus an understanding of spatial knowledge in terms of its acquisition, storage, organisation in memory, internalisation and action seem to be the fundamental aspect of complex mental processes. The internalisation under the strong influences of various factors like culture, time, maturity, gender, degree of exposure etc. affects significantly the kind and level of spatial awareness one is carrying about the spatial reality. The medium of expression dealing with this reality in any form namely verbal or written is often termed as **'mental maps'** (Gould, 1974). The term is differently coined as **'topological schemata'** (Griffin, 2002), spatial or **cognitive images** (Lloyd, 1982), **cognitive space** (Montello, 1989).

The mental maps reveal not only an individual impression but also a group's conception of different people or places in a given period. These impressions generally emerged from the use of perceptual filter in tune with the particular cultures and beliefs. Since a human being is incapable of internalising all perceived information, he uses perceptual filters due to which the resultant mental map instead of originating from direct first hand experiences, resulted from carefully filtered, pre-digested information gained in the process of socialisation through different social institutions, social groups, social situations, social groups, social situations, social interactions, social roles etc. This knowledge of spatial reality is contextual, dynamic and provides the interface mechanism between sensed information and behaviour.

The misconception of reality through the acquisition of filtered knowledge is the cause for the development of stereotyped communication both oral and written forms. **'Stereotypes'** are fixed impression and, exaggerated and preconceived ideas and descriptions about certain group of people or society. It is found to be difficult to change or replace stereotypes with facts. (Lloyd et.al. 1989)

Social scientists often defined stereotypes as beliefs about the personal characteristics of a group or category of people. Though the early studies saw stereotypes as incorrect, rigid or faulty expressions, more contemporary researchers found them to be arising out of normal and adaptive cognitive processes, culminating into generalised presumptions about certain social groups which bias the perception of and behaviour towards individual members of those groups so as to maintain the stereotypes and generate behavioural confirmation to it (Grace et.al. 1952). These stereotypes when evaluated and analysed can be positive, mental or negative. Only negative stereotypes are usually viewed as expression of prejudiced attitudes.

While social psychologists have primarily studied the cognitive, perceptual, and affective aspects of prejudices, socio-logists have concentrated on the behavioural expressions of prejudice. (Signall et.al. 1971, Devine. 1989, Lee. 1996, Weaver. 2008). The most studied behavioural expressions of prejudice have been **social distance** intentions or preferences social distance is generally defined as a function of affective distance between the members of two groups. Though the term 'Social distance' was coined by Simmel (1908), Emory S. Bogardus (1925) developed a psychological testing scale to empirically measure people's willingness to participate in social contacts of varying degree of closeness with members of diverse social groups such as class, race / ethnicity or sexuality. This 'social distance scale' has been widely used by to analyse the behavioural expressions either mild or extreme e.g. aggression and violence.

The development of stereotyped communication both oral and written, has been the source of tension and conflicts which is in turn formed by the misconception of reality and knowledge acquisition. Research studies are not lacking to show that children's education reinforces sex role stereotypes both directly and indirectly in school textbooks, choice of the courses etc. But this study tries to examine how social distance and knowledge acquired impacted the stereotype development in school children. The study may act as a springboard to further understand the modalities behaviour change and thereby equip them with empathy towards their neighbours.

The study focussed mainly on the acquired knowledge itself than on the **processes** of knowledge acquisition. The inner complexities of the knowledge acquired by the Indian children and the way in which the collective perceptions controlled and biased by the location are revealed in the study. Keeping the core constituents of awareness and experiences, this study broadly taking 'knowledge' of the Indian children in the context of geographical (facts) or non-geographical namely social, economic, historical facts of the country namely Bangladesh to understand the factors responsible for shaping social distance – apartness or closeness in a given way.

In the light of above discussion, the following research questions were framed.

- What is the collective perception of students about a neighbouring country i.e. Bangladesh?

- How is the knowledge of a neighbouring country acquired by the children influencing their perception?

- How are these perception controlled and biased by social distance?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was conducted in two different cities in India – Delhi and Kolkata. Delhi is the capital of India about 1500km away from Dhaka (Capital of Bangladesh) and Kolkata is the capital of West Bengal State sharing the border with the Bangladesh (vide Map).

The participants involved in this study belong to a particular ethnic and linguistic group – Bengali. A convenience sample composed of 202 students studying in IX standard (14-15 years) in five public schools and a state supported schools. The students represented the following schools:

Figure 1

Table 1: Sample Schools in Delhi and Kolkata

S. No	Name of the School	Location	Number of Students Participated
1	Raisina Bengali School	Delhi	48
2	Lady Irwin School	Delhi	47
3	Vivekananda Vidyalaya	Kolkata	36
4	Shish Niketan	Kolkata	34
5	A.G. Church School	Kolkata	37

Majority (98%) of the students from Delhi schools happened to have their native place (roots) in West Bengal state and it was assumed that they may have relatively better knowledge about Bangladesh. The students of secondary schools selected from particular type of schools located in Delhi and Kolkatta belong to same ethinic and linguistic groups i.e. Bengalis, but differentiated by social and physical distance. Though divided by country borders and belonged same ethnicity group, the historical events[2] played an important role in the ol development of stereo types in children.

DATA COLLECTION

Sources of secondary data comprised of textbooks and other sources providing factual details about Bangladesh. The school textbooks especially history, geography and literature were scrutinised to list out factual knowledge items, which were classified as geographical facts and non-geographical facts.

Geographical Facts: Topography, climate, rivers, occupation, exports.

Non-Geographical Facts: Religion, language, flags historical events, capital, currency, words / personalities / objects.

The questions were framed on the above facts by recognition based question- multiple choice items and matching items. Analysis of the data thus collected aimed to ascertain the amount of knowledge acquired by students.

Another set of data was collected to understand the nature of stereotypes developed and expressed in words. The recall based questions framed by noting short phrases and single word about all those objects and characteristics which strike their mind when they hear the country's name, Bangladesh.

The study focused more on already acquired knowledge than on the process of knowledge acquisition. The process was understood by reviewing limited research work done on impact of media, mass communication etc.

ANALYSIS

Knowledge Acquisition, Social Distance and Development of Stereotypes

All the students were asked to give personal details related to the socio economic informations and were used in the analysis wherever seemed appropriate in explanation.

Table 2: Knowledge Acquisition

Factual Knowledge (Topography)	Percentage of Students Answered Correctly	
	Delhi	Kolkata
Rivers	18	51
Climate	26	42
Occupation	27.6	40
Export	33.3	43
Language	67.3	72
Religion	37.3	62
Flag	39.2	63
Currency	36.4	73
Capital	63.6	78
Important places and persons	1.6	32
Important National Day	7.4	23

Access to information through newspapers, television, computer internet connection play an important role. Physical proximity of students in Kolkata to Bangladesh and majority of the students exposed local and regional newspaper tend to influence the knowledge acquired.

Children in Kolkata

Sources Specified: Mostly regional local papers: Dainik Janambhumi, Rangmela, Anand Bayaar Patrika, The Telegraph (English Paper).

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Recognise most of the geographical and non-geographical facts of Bangladesh.

Families of some of them migrated from Chittagong district of Bangladesh. These children showed more interest because of the historical links with the other nation. About 18% of them were able to trace their lineage. Geographical facts – jute (exports), physical features, name of rivers (Padma, Brahmaputra) agriculture.

Children in Delhi

The data in comparison showed the students in Delhi through migrated from West Bengal and settled in Delhi showed less interest in knowing about Bangladesh. In an informal interview, they said that they were into central politics and national news than into their native state.

The phrases and words are classified and given below

- **Some of the Positive Stereotypes Describes the Noncontroversial Facts:** Numerous coconut trees, Ganges river flow, water in abundance, rice in abundance.

- **Some Personality and Behaviour Stereotypes are Delhi:** Conservative muslims, better than Pakistani muslim, violent people, terrorist, refuges, loosing team in cricket crowded, rival to India and fight with India.

- **Stereotypes on Physical Appearance and Mannerism:** Include black in colour, dirty, poor starvation, Delhi cloud, Kolkata due.

- **Stereotyped Related to the Socio- Economic Condition of Bangladesh People:** Poor people, underdeveloped, borrow from India, unemployed.

CONCLUSIONS

Though the context is located with specific social locations (i.e. Bengalis in Delhi and Kolkata and Bengalis and Muslims in Bangladesh) and one should be cautious about making generalised claims developed. Stereotypes identified by students are complex and difficult to dis entangle the deep rooted historical and social roots that may not lend themselves to immediate solution. Changes in the understanding social distance and correction of stereotypes implies fundamental power relations at the political and bilateral social level as well as at the micro level of beliefs and practices in local neighbourhood.

The efforts to bring unity and harmony in the world by understanding the children's perception of other people culminated into a set of stereotypes do not exist in vacuum. The understanding of 'other' countries should not be vulnerable to any type of prejudices or stereotypes projection. Student needs to be initiated in the formal education and in the people – to – people social interaction to and strengthen the social ties between countries.

Note 1

The country, Bangladesh extending from 20˚ 50" N latitude and 88'E to 92˚ 45" E longitude is bounded west and northwest by West Bengal state of Indian sub - continent.

Bangladesh had unique distinction of sharing Indian historical and cultural heritage as well as the Islamic Nationhood of Pakistan. Formerly part of Bengal, it became East Pakistan when India achieved Independence in 1947. After Independence, the people of this area initially accepted their newly developed Pakistani identity wholeheartedly.

But within short period of time they started developing disillusion due to lack of their people representation in the army and bureaucracy and denial of official status to Bengali along with continuous domination of the Urdu speaking Muslims from the west. All these have ultimately caused civil war with West Pakistan in 1971, culminating in military intervention by India and Bangladesh formed a separate nation at end of the same year.

Note 2

Basic Statistics of Bangladesh

Ethnic Group: Bengali (98%), Bihari and tribal groups (2%)

Population: 137.4 million

Currency: Taka

Capital: Dhaka

Religion: Islam (83%), Hindu (16%) others (1%)

Language: Bangla more than (95%)

Government: Multiparty Republic.

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